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Success, failure and the relocation of risk in Europe's "fight against irregular migration"

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This paper offers some brief comparative notes on the political economy of border controls. Based on ethnographic research on European border security, it argues that while attempts to 'combat' migration via patrols, fences and crack-downs in 'third countries' have frequently failed on their own terms, they have also proved rather successful for the political and institutional actors that stand to benefit from them. Building on recent comparative analysis by the authors, the paper further considers how the security paradigm for fighting migration exhibits parallels to the 'war on terror' and the 'war on drugs', both as concerns their destructive consequences and their manifold political and financial gains. This comparative approach to systems of 'securitised' intervention reveals how vested interests have helped perpetuate counterproductive approaches, as well as how risks (including that of human suffering) have routinely been exported into geographical 'buffer zones'. In exploring these dynamics, the paper puts focus on collaborations between Western states instigating intervention and poorer 'partner states,' showing how a skewed distribution of risk may tilt interventions in the instigators' favour while maintaining 'skin in the game' for less powerful actors. The paper concludes that such a systemic understanding of costs, risks and gains may open up policy space for a rethinking of the destructive security

approach seen today at and beyond the borders of Europe.

Since the start of the "war on terror", terrorist attacks have escalated across the world; after years of "combating migration", Europe experienced its most dramatic border crisis yet in 2015; and the "war on drugs" continues to thrive alongside mass incarceration and mounting fatalities. In each case, expensive security interventions have fallen short in terms of the majority of the most loudly expressed aims. Yet these interventions retain enduring appeal for policy-makers. Why so?

To answer this question, we approach these interventions comparatively as systems through which logics of security consolidate, benefits accrue, and risks are unevenly distributed. In considering these dynamics through a systemic lens, we have adopted the notion of *game* for its potential to illuminate the conflictive and sometimes symbiotic relationships among "players" or security actors. Within this relational perspective, we argue that the negative consequences of the three security interventions have been very unevenly distributed, with key instigating countries and actors avoiding some (but not all) of the worst risks and costs associated with their operations.

Security games: dimensions within states instigating intervention

The first dimension of “security games” that we will consider here concerns the enforcer-target interaction. Whether in the wars on drugs and terror or the fight against migration, practitioners’ frequent labelling of operations as a “game of tag and catch” or “whack-a-mole” hint at a specific logic of intervention: the centrality of cracking down on the “supply side” of the problem that is ostensibly being “combated”. Economic analyses have long noted that the “war on drugs” focuses on cracking down on the supply of narcotics, rather than targeting persistent *demand* in destination states. Similarly “supply-centric” interventions (in the broadest sense) can be observed in our two other security interventions, which focus on targets neutralised or immobilised (terrorists, smugglers, migrants) rather than the wider structural reasons why the phenomenon persists.¹

This one-sided kind of intervention has frequently proven disastrous. Consider irregular migration into Europe by sea, which hardly existed before a shift to stringent visa rules for North Africans in southern European Union countries in the early 1990s. Since then, a series of highly politicised “border crises” of escalating severity has unfolded *alongside* tighter border security. In a context where people lack safe legal pathways, border security initiatives have produced recurrent displacement effects (similarly seen in the war on drugs) — pushing migrants towards dangerous routes and more precarious entry methods while feeding the smuggling business along these new, riskier crossings. While the spike in arrivals of 2015 came to an end after an EU-Turkey accord, the underlying destructive dynamics remain the same, as seen in the escalating fatality ratio and dramatic suffering on the central and western Mediterranean routes.

In short, by visibly targeting the “supply side” while largely leaving structural drivers unaddressed, border security interventions have often *worsened* the situation by generating criminal innovation, chaotic scenes and rising fatalities. Similar disastrous consequences can be seen in the wars on terror and drugs. Why, then, do governments continue down the same path?

This question brings us to another dimension of the games metaphor: how it helps illuminate the *performative* dimension of se-

curity interventions. Indeed, the framing of our three security games as a one-sided fight against a particular phenomenon already constitutes a *political* win, even if the practical results prove disappointing. The economic benefits in core countries, and for key security actors, are also considerable.

In the fight against migration, fear and an “emergency” framing have been useful for powerful Western actors, both economically and politically. On the economic side, corporate lobbying has helped convince governments to increase spending on detention, barriers, surveillance technology, and military hardware. In the United States, the fight against migration has multiplied Border Patrol personnel and the budget of Customs and Border Protection under the post-9/11 Department for Homeland Security, and the same holds true in Europe.

This growth arises in large part — as in the wars on drugs and terror — from how the problem has been politically framed as an existential threat, often with little regard to evidence. This political potency of securitisation is especially obvious when it clusters the putative threats of migration, drugs and terror in a discrete space such as the US-Mexico border or the Mediterranean. In the US, the post-9/11 period saw the southwestern border becoming heavily securitised, with migrant interdiction framed as halting potential terrorists, while in Europe since 2015, the external borders have served as stage for the political spectacle of “invasion”. Here, the drama at the borders is deployed politically to silence alternatives and to present border enforcement as the only feasible solution to the “emergency”, bolstered by frequent exaggeration of the numbers.

“Double games” and games of risk: the role of “partner states”

After very briefly considering two key dimensions of “gaming” within instigating Western states, we next consider the “double games” played by (non-Western) partner countries in the three security interventions. Here we find substantial scope for ostensible partners to manipulate the rules and even set some of their own. Both instigating and partner governments have often paid lip-service to a “joint” endeavour that few actors believe is actually going to work, while perverse incentives keep generating more of the problem ostensibly being combated.

Signing up to Europe’s “fight” against migration has offered significant leverage to partner governments as they alternate between selectively collaborating and stoking

1 We do not by any means draw equivalencies between terror, drugs and migrants in themselves: rather, our comparison is concerned with the logics informing the respective interventions.

the “threat”. For instance, Morocco has obtained substantial diplomatic leeway (notably in relation to occupied Western Sahara) by presenting itself as a bulwark against migration that may at any time stop functioning. There are also — as in the wars on drugs and terror — substantial *economic* gains to be had for “partner” governments and agencies in both appearing to collaborate and in selective stoking, as seen in Turkey since 2015.

Again, games around terrorism, drugs and migration have often combined, multiplying the potential gains, as seen most clearly with Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi. Having been ostracised and labelled a sponsor of terrorism, Gaddafi strategically clawed his way back onto the international stage in part by offering to help “rein in” international terrorism, and in part by offering to control migration flows. In return, Gaddafi asked for political and economic favours, resulting inter alia in the lifting of the embargo and the expensive Libya-Italy “Friendship Pact” of 2008. As NATO launched its air strikes in 2011, Gaddafi shifted fully from “collaboration” to stoking, as he threatened to unleash an “unprecedented wave of illegal immigration” on southern European shores.

In short, in the double games played among ostensible partners in a given security intervention, the “rules” are being actively subverted by the nominally weaker parties. Yet our fourth and final dimension of the game takes us back to the intervention as seen by instigating states, from whose perspective we are not witnessing total failure when it comes to *distributing* and relocating the risks that the “war” or “fight” claims to address.

In the “game of risk” played by instigating states, the dominant “players” calculate that the gains offered for participating in the intervention will be enough to keep partner states engaged in distributing the problem in a way favourable to them, notwithstanding any additional leverage gained by such partners in the process.

Consider the risk distributions of the war on terror: the escalating terror attacks worldwide since 9/11 have only rarely hit Western instigating states, rather concentrating in “hotspot” countries including the very ones invaded as part of the “war”. Consider, similarly, the risk distribution of the war on drugs, where “partner countries” such as Mexico have faced the bulk of the fallout. And consider, finally, the fight against migration in Europe, which has frequently “succeeded” in redistributing the risks towards buffer zones and towards refugees and migrants, as seen in pushbacks to Libya, containment in Greece and Turkey, or pre-emptive crackdowns in the Sahel.

Conclusion: the persistence of destructive interventions

In conclusion, then, the overlapping dimensions of the security games played around terrorism, drugs and migration provide a powerful tool for explaining why destructive interventions persist. Even though each of the three systems of intervention may “fail” on a global level, they “succeed”, first, in framing a nebulous issue in narrow political terms; second, in enrolling and rewarding a very large array of actors, “setting the game” for everyone else to follow; and third (to a degree), in making sure that risks are transferred away from “core” to buffer zones. However, the systems of intervention exhibit significant degrees of instability, providing openings for potential alternatives.

At least three important sources of opposition — actual or potential — can be identified. First, those who lose out within the current systems (risk-facing states and actors) frequently oppose them. Second, the “loading” of costs and risks onto less powerful actors also tends to generate different kinds of “blowback” that negatively impact even core states after a time-lag. And third, hard-won lessons from one security intervention can be applied to another. In the “war on drugs”, encouraging steps have been taken towards harm reduction instead of a near-exclusive focus on supply. Amid a large fallout from the US-sponsored war on drugs, some Latin American governments have begun (albeit in stops and starts) to pursue a more inclusive approach to peace and to drug control. As this case suggests, a shift towards the wider public good may be the best starting point for a radical change of approach in all three interventions — and the instigators of such a shift are likely to be those most badly affected by the current risk distribution, working effectively as a transnational coalition.

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Seminaari:

Yksintulleiden pakolaisnuorten perhe ja kotoutuminen

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Yksintulleista turvapaikanhakijanuorista puhutaan paljon. Vähemmän huomiota on kuitenkin saanut se, mitä nuorille kuuluu oleskeluluvan saamisen jälkeen ja millaisia haasteita heidän elämässään Suomessa on. Pureudumme seminaarissamme tähän vähemmän esillä olleeseen aiheeseen ja kuulemme niin viranomaisten, tutkijoiden kuin yksintulleiden nuorten omia puheenvuoroja liittyen palveluiden kehittämiseen, yksintulleiden nuorten jälkihuoltoon ja perheestä erossaolon kokemuksiin.

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